

## Portraits of Giving honour York Region volunteers



**By Brock Weir**

Mike Rathke is no stranger to being in the spotlight.

His dance shoes were practically still warm from burning up the dance floor last year in the first annual Dancing with the Easter Seals Stars when he was approached by the camera lens of Richmond Hill photographer Karen Merk and the pen of Melony Teague to share his journey with a wider audience.

Mr. Rathke, owner of MR Menswear in Downtown Aurora, is flying the flag for the Town in Ms. Merk's seventh-annual Portraits of Giving exhibition, which launches in Newmarket this week to mark National Volunteer Week.

Portraits of Giving was created by Ms. Merk to shine a light on individuals across York Region who have given back to the communities around them, and this has been a driving force in Mr. Rathke's life since he battled a brain tumour.

"It was right in the midst of what I was going through at the time," says Mr. Rathke on what set him on the path of looking for ways and means of contributing. "I was thinking about volunteering at Sick Kids when I was in bed at the hospital across the street from there. I thought, there are so many kids going through this and their parents don't really know what they're going through, so I thought I would be able to assist both parents and the kids. I thought it needs to be talked about."

As he fought his battle, and continues his recovery, Mr. Rathke has never shied away from being candid about the challenges he has faced. He is fortunate enough to be able to do so, he says, and avoiding the tough topics was never a thought that entered his mind.

"I am fortunate enough to say I am a survivor," he says. "I have been through a lot and it has taken a long time to recover, that's for sure, but I am very, very fortunate to be where I am today. They never got all of the brain tumour because it was in such a delicate spot. I was in pretty bad shape and they couldn't operate anymore, so according to the doctors it is still there, but I am very fortunate it hasn't expanded or grown, and the cancer cells haven't re-formed."

A resident of Brampton when he began his cancer battle, he travelled from home base to Princess Margaret Hospital on a regular basis for his treatment. From this experience, he says he immediately saw the value in having these cancer treatment services available closer to home and has been a tireless fundraiser and supporter for the Stronach Cancer Centre at Southlake Regional Health Centre.

Southlake's Cancer Centre is set to be one of two benefiting charities next month, along with the M.S. Society of Canada, when Mr.

Rathke, MR Menswear, and a number of other local notables take over Aw, Shucks! on Tuesday, May 3, for a charity fashion show.

It is a tradition Mr. Rathke established when his store was based in Newmarket but after a few years' hiatus, it was high time to revive the event.

“It started out as ladies night about a month before Christmas and then it was for breast cancer and we had local fire fighters at the show,” he explains. “This store is a little tight for the fashion show, so it is great to get that going again. I am overwhelmed by the amount of people who are willing to get involved and assist me. There is an incredible team and a bunch of great people. I am basically just dressing the guys and making sure they are walking on the red carpet at the proper time. Everyone involved is just incredible.”

Mr. Rathke might be downplaying his actual involvement. Looking back at her part in writing the individual profiles to accompany the Portraits of Giving exhibition, Ms. Teague says she was “fortunate enough” to get some time with him as he is so busy within the community.

“It is just amazing to me that even though he has had so many health setbacks he has been able to pursue the dream he has had since he was a teen to have his own boutique,” says Ms. Teague. “He never gave up on that dream and even though he had some really hard challenges he stuck with it.”

“All the people in this year's exhibition do what they do because of a heartfelt passion for the causes they believe in. Whether the causes have come through tragedies like illness, they have chosen to overcome that and give back rather than let the tragedy cripple them. They have chosen to rise above and give back rather than pull back and be more self-focused.”

“These people are very inspiring because they are normal people just like you and me with very busy lives and when you see how they have been able to give back despite their various challenges and commitments, it will inspire the same in the person who reads the stories or sees the portraits. They are great role models for young people. Even those who are retired can be inspired to use their time in their later years to make a difference in people's lives.”

For more on the Portraits of Giving Exhibition, visit [www.merkphotography.com](http://www.merkphotography.com).